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SUBJECT: THE EFFECTS OF LEISHMANIASIS IN COLOMBIA

REF: SECSTATE 138350

Classified By: DCM Milton Drucker for Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (S) Leishmaniasis, the parasitic disease spread by the bite of infected sand flies, is a disease plaguing the military and rural poor in Colombia. Reported civilian cases have risen from 4,000 in 1990 to nearly 10,000 in 2003 to a record 13,000 in 2004. Growth in outbreaks within the Colombian Army has been proportionate to outbreaks within the general Colombian public. Within the last year and a half, the Colombian military reported 11,000 cases of Leishmaniasis. In comparison, 455 soldiers died and 1,713 were wounded in 2004 fighting the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). During that same year, Leishmaniasis was the direct or indirect cause of removing 3,400 soldiers from combat.

Effect on the military

2. (S) Leishmaniasis is present throughout areas where the Colombian military and FARC are present. The standard treatment for the parasite requires intermuscular injections of 10 to 15 milliliters of Glucantime each day for 20-30 days. Because of the toxicity of the drug, a patient's blood chemistry must be closely monitored. The treatment of leishmaniasis also requires that patients be kept out of the sun and heat. However, this is very difficult to do in many of the areas where the armed conflict is taking place. As a result, the soldiers, recovery period is generally longer than usual. In an attempt to improve treatment for infected soldiers, the government is now moving them out of their units to receive treatment in Bogota or at Silva Plazas' mechanized calvary group in Duitama, Boyaca.

3. (S) The disease is also affecting the GOC's canine bomb detection units. Once dogs are infected, they are immediately euthinized as dangerous carriers of the parasite. This has had an adverse affect on morale in the canine units, as many of the handlers have been partnered with their dogs since they were puppies.

Limited Treatment Options

4. (S/NF) The GOC has struggled with providing preventive measures for many troops. Although uniforms are often impregnated with insect repellent, after months of constant wear, rain, and sweat, such measures lose their effectiveness. Some troops have turned to repellent soaps and lotions to help combat the disease, but these products have been hard to supply to remote areas. Unfortunately, the GOC has found there is still a high incidence of the disease amongst soldiers who use the Nopikex soap and other repellents.

5. (S/NF) Between January and March 2005, the Colombian military treated 2,127 patients with 142,175 ampoules of Glucantime, at a cost of USD 497,612. Sanofi Aventis, the sole manufacturer of Glucantime, is no longer producing enough of the drug to meet Colombian demand due to profitability concerns. The Colombian military is currently looking into alternative therapies, such as miltefosine, although studies show this is a less effective drug.

6. (U) The Embassy, through MilGroup and SOUTHCOM, is not permitted to provide funding for most drugs that treat leishmaniasis because they are not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The experimental drug Pentostam, currently in trials in the United States, is not effective against most strains of leishmaniasis found in Colombia.

7. (S//NF) This year the USG, through SOUTHCOM, provided the Colombian Army with USD 500,000 of insect repellent which included DEET and Permethrin. Although many soldiers have found the repellent to be effective, the Colombian military would prefer additional U.S. technical support in the area of early diagnosis and identification of the parasite strain,

which would enable the Colombian Army medical teams to make more effective use of Glucantime and antibiotic supplies in the fight against the disease.

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